

Tape #12
Interview with Lambert Modder
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01:05

I So you, also, I understand, were charged with taking care of the bodies and the wounded coming in, could you talk a little bit about the state of these people when they came in, what you saw, and what you did to help them?

LM Well, the ones that I got, they were all dead. All dead, except this one guy who told me, 'I think you remember me.' And I said, 'no, I don't remember you at all.' That was John Faltner, that clown. Uh, no, they were all dead, seriously. **They were just torn apart, you know, some were faceless, some had arms off. Most of them, naturally, were pretty well oil-soaked, because of all the oil in the waters there. Lots of skin off. That's about all I can remember. You know, when you reach for a hand, you try and make a fingerprint out of it, and there's no fingers there, what the hell you gonna do? So, you make an impression, try to, physically, write it out, you might say, if there was room. You had to make some type of identification, and if you didn't, they just stockpiled 'em like wood. On this pile. Separately.**

02:42

I How many deceased men did you see that day?

LM Ohhh, I tell you, I...maybe a couple hundred. You see, there was four of us, as I recall, and just like the rows that they'd come in, you know, off of these pickups, and they'd carry them in on stretchers, and so forth. Probably a couple hundred, and I was at it, maybe, 6 or 7 hours. That was the end gate for me, and I left, I went to my quarters. And then some wise guy opened up with an airplane that night. I couldn't stand that, so I walked over to the hospital and went down in the archives, 'cause I'd also worked in the records office, and that was about a floor between the ground and up. You could rest in there, you couldn't hear the noise, see.

03:49

I Speaking of noise,
Wait for airplane

04:19

I After the 7th, how did life change on base and on the island?

LM Well, after the 7th, I suppose I was primarily in the records office. We had probably 6 or 8 people in there, you know, the officer in charge, a couple of chiefs under him, and then a couple of typists like I was. As far as records, outside entertainment and that, we'd go out to Waikiki, sit beneath the

great Banyan tree, and have a few hookers out there, come back to base, might wind up with a drink or two of GI alcohol, that was it. But we'd start in good shape for the next day. We'd think. But we was young enough, we could handle it. Boy, that was a good one, wasn't it, I never thought of that one before.

05:30

I Did things tighten down on base and on the island?

LM See, we went to letter writing, and that was all covered. As far as going ashore, you were limited as to the time of day that you had to be back on the base. Well, I suppose it was tightened down. Cause, you remember the blackout lights? They had little slot corner to the headlight. And we had one fella, he was a - drove for the executive officer, and we got to go with him, periodically, because he had a car with a slot in the headlights, and he could do that. You couldn't see that thing from the air. But otherwise, no, I don't think it tightened down, as I can remember.

06:39

I How did your...could you tell us the story of how you got in contact with your parents to let them know that you were okay?

LM Well, I'll tell you, that's another interesting little story, because all you could write was a postcard to tell them you were alright. Not where you're at, or nothing. I sent this postcard to my parents, and the old boy who worked in the elevator, always picked up the mail for the elevator, and accidentally, this postcard had gotten in the elevator's box. So the manager said to this gentleman, he says, 'this belongs to Harm Modder.' That was my dad. 'So would you take it to him?' 'Sure.' So he puts it in the bib of his overall, but he forgot about it until his wife was going to do some washing the following Monday, and she said, 'what's this postcard for?' 'Oh my G-d,' he says, 'that's for Harm Modder'. That's my dad. So that's the first, and this is a week or so later, and they had no idea what happened to me, see. But then, when they got the card, all okay. So then, to make matters worse, why I thought, well, I'll see if I can telephone them, which you could, but you were restricted as to what you could say, and so forth. And so were my folks. In fact, they went into town, into the telephone office. They couldn't make the call on a line, a country line. Naturally, my dad, the first thing that he says, 'where the hell you at?' And they slapped him off, said 'you can't ask him that'. 'Oh, okay. How's the weather out there?' Whack. Caught him again. Oh, I'll tell you, that was a ball. And a little bit of it was just recognition, that was about it that we could say, but, he had quite a time. He did just the opposite of what they told him he could do.

I Sounds like that trait runs in the family.

LM Right.

08:43

I How did you finish out your time in service?

LM I finished out my time in the service in China. I spent about 4 years in

Pearl. I came back to a couple of places in the States, Astoria, Oregon and Sun Valley, Idaho. And the guy I taught everything he should know at Pearl, in the records office, got to be in the district office in Seattle, and he called me. He said, 'Lambert, you're about to go overseas again, you know that?' I said, 'what do you mean, go overseas. Hell, I just go back, you know.' 'Well, that's it. Where would you like to go?' 'Well', I says, 'I really never been on a ship, except in transit.' So, where do they put me? In the Marines. The Navy furnished the Marines medical. That was a bad choice, but anyway, I went along with it. Had to, there was no alternative. I went out to Camp Pendleton, California, and I went over to Hawaii. They didn't want us there. So then I went to Guam, they didn't want us there. Laid around there for a while. Finally, we went to China. When I came into China, initially, I had 21 men. We got on a train and got into Tien Sin, which is now Peking, they call it.

Background pause

10:35

I So we were talking about how you closed out your time in the military, and you had gotten to China.

LM Right. Okay, we got down to Sig Men Tao, got off the ship and got on this train. And there was 21 of us guys. When we got into China, or in Tien Sin, we went to take our baggage off, the bags were there, but they were empty. Some Chinamen had got on there and cut the bottoms right out of those son of a gun, right while we was on the - and cleaned us out, didn't have a stitch, see. So, when we left, I said to the guys, anybody tries to get on this car, boot their but off, will ya. Okay. Lambert booted one off, he was a general, a Chinese general. So, when we got down to Peyo Beach, I think it was, get that smart chief back here to Tien Sin, we're gonna court marshall that son of a gun, you know. And if I hadn't of known this full commander, I probably wouldn't be sitting here today, I'd still be sitting in the pokey out there in China. With those, oh my gosh, they were slicker than snot on a door handle, those Chinamen. And you know, there's one thing they hated to be called, a thief. But when they caught one, you know what they did with him? They'd hang him up, and there'd be rods like this, just hanged, and they'd hang him 4, 5 days, break him of that habit of stealing, you know. We had a chief's mess, and we were always missing our sugar. Nobody used much sugar, but the sugar bowls were always empty. Finally, they had a shakedown at one of the main gates where they came through. Well, you know, all the rags they wrapped around their legs and so forth, they'd undo all this, and they'd pour the sugar in that boot, and then put it back on, put the wraps around, and walk right through the gate. Why, that G-d darn chinaman that we had, he must have gotten 100 pounds of sugar off us. But it broke him of it.

12:46

I What's the single most vivid memory, what's the thing you remember the most from December 7?

LM Let me think that one over.

Pause for plane and thinking.

13:40

LM Well, I realize that it was an historical day, but to put one thing definite down, I just can't give you an answer to that. I know where I was at, I was at the compound hospital, I was accused of the luger, which I knew nothing about, they put me to work identifying these people, and that night, somebody revved up an airplane, so I went down to the archives and records office, got myself a little sleep. Nothing in particular. See, I didn't get down to where the ships were blowing apart. It was a couple of days before we could walk down there. I don't know what else to tell you. I'm not going to lie to you. Cause I wouldn't know how to lie.

14:47

I What do you think Pearl Harbor has meant to the country?

LM You know, that's an interesting question. You know what my answer always is, that was the day of the turnaround. We was in a bad shape, you know that. We didn't have any money, we were fighting with Germany, and we had no materials. Why, when they blew our fleet off the map, which they shouldn't do or couldn't do but did anyhow. Many people don't understand that. But that's when the women went into factories, and went to work. The men went to the service to defend their country. Everybody was involved. But it's amazing. And one of the things that bothers me today, I do a lot of speaking, to schools primarily, big groups of kids, and I like to mostly get the kids where their parents were not old enough to get into the service, and the kids know absolutely nothing. And the parents don't give a damn. Or does the teaching profession, I don't care if they nail me today. And they know it. I've gone to the state house and complained, you know. Why can't we do some more of this talking. I had one school I worked on for a year. Principal said no, no, no, no no. Finally, I got 300 9th graders in that school, not that particular school, but schools around there. You know what, the teachers were lined up in the aisles. They figured there'd be a riot. Never heard a peep out of those guys, I spoke for 50 minutes. When I got through, they waltzed out, went to their classes, and the principal came to me and said, 'what in the world did you say to them?' I says, 'You didn't listen either, did you?' That's exactly what I told him. I'm going back, and I'm gonna talk to another group one of these first days. Because, this is a whole thing, this things has never been exercised. People just don't understand it. Either they don't want to understand it, or they can't understand it, but we were in one hell of a shape. And I add this, how would you have liked to be under Japanese control? Some Yakamuki telling you what you can do and what the hell you can't do. Pardon my French, but anyways, I had to say it.

17:32

I There's about 1 million and a half visitors every year who go out to the

Arizona memorial, what would you tell them as a Pearl Harbor survivor? What experience would you hope they take away from that?

LM I would probably tell them this: There's lots of materials there they can read, they can go out to the memorial, and I can give them a real good experience. The first time I took my wife out to the Arizona, who do you think manned the boats going out there? Two Japanese girls. This old boy comes back bawling like a baby. Finally, I got back, and one of the Park Service boys said to me, 'just let it out. We know what's wrong with you.' And I did, I really was crying. And I looked up, and here this guy had USS West Virginia on his badge, and he said to me, 'you know. I couldn't swim a stroke. I was blown off the West Virginia, got over to Ford Island, and I'm talking to you today.' And I got my senses back. I couldn't believe it, see, I forgot all about these two Japanese girls that I could have strung up like that, because when I first got on the Arizona, one of the main fellas that I was gonna go on liberty with, on Sunday, had been in the hospital, and he was going back to the Arizona, but he couldn't get off because they needed extra help, and his name is on the board there, on the Arizona. Period. So, never got to see him. But, that's about the length of my story, what I would tell them, and I don't care who you are, you could be Admiral Nimitz, as far as I'm concerned, I'd give you the same answer. Really.

19:42

I What do you think about the way you feel when you're out on that memorial?

LM I just about shudder apart, I do. It just gets to me. I can't help it. I tell you, right now I could break down and cry, and getting on that memorial, it's a bitch. Period. They can talk all they want about that oil still coming up, but I can still think of when Pearl Harbor was started. My wife even gets mad at me sometimes. She says, 'You eat and sleep that Pearl Harbor stuff.' It's cause I can't help it. It's part of me. It is.

20:38

I Is there anything that I haven't asked that you think is important that you would like to share?

LM I've told you this before. When I first got to Pearl Harbor, I thought it was the most beautiful place in the world. Clean, flowers, girls, men, no fights, no drugs, no nothing. If guys got drunk for example, sailors, the shore patrol would pick em up off the street and haul em back to their ships or wherever they came from. There was no argument, no arguments in the...maybe I was just on the wrong side of the street, I don't know, but it was always comfortable where I was at. And Waikiki, oh my gosh. And we've been out to Waikiki numerous times, we've been out there quite a few times in fact. One time, the Mohana Hotel, you know where that's at, I presume, when the Japs bought that, the overhauled that son of a gun, it was gorgeous. And these two Japanese girls were showing you around, see. I even thought they were attractive, see. But still, you can't get that out of your system, these Japanese, I don't care if it's...what you want to call it, but...I have a very good friend here in the village. He was a

prisoner of war in Korigador, five years. We were up in Utah, one day, it's cool up there in the summertime, we enjoy it, so one day he said to me, 'where you from?' I says, 'Arizona'. He says, 'whereabouts?' 'Mesa.' 'Whereabouts in Mesa?' I says 'Sunland Village.' Well he says that's where he was from, and that was the end of the conversation. A couple days later, he said to me, 'you know, you had one tough day, December 7, but I had 5 years.' I swallowed a couple times. We got to be very good friends. He's blind today, still living, not too far from here. And still, he respects me, even though he figured I only had one bad day, it was December 7, and him and his 5 years. He got caught one time, he told me, trying to steal some food. He always figured, next day, that was it. Line you up, dig your own graves, then turn em around and shoot em, see. Push em in there. Good guy. He's just a year or two older than I am.

23:45

Thank you and goodbye.

End Interview.